CHEAP TRUTH 4

EDITORIAL. This issue heads for the fringes of SF with nonfiction books, comics, and, perhaps least central of all, the plans of publishers. Future issues will include reviews of periodicals in "Squirming Mags" and a semiotic analysis of science fiction in rock videos. If this is the first CHEAP TRUTH you have seen, ask the nice man in the trenchcoat to give you some xeroxes. CHEAP TRUTH, 809-C West 12th Street, Austin, Texas 78701. Vincent Omniaveritas, editing. Todd Refinery, Graphics. "The Truth Cannot Be Copyrighted"

Mr. Augean Stapledon, a third-eyed tuatara of the first water, offers us the following REPTILE NEWS:

I started with the intention of writing something about Isaac Asimov's ROBOTS OF DAWN. And then I thought, why do you want to do that? That old hack isn't the problem. Just another guy resurrecting the decaying flesh of ideas, plots, and characters dead thirty years now, pumping in a little '80's topicality (lame sex), and grabbing himself a whole bunch of money and a chrome rocket. What the hell? You give a guy a license to steal, you've got to expect him to use it.

But who gave him the license? That's better, much more to the point.

First, though, look further. An endless stream of Dune books, leper books, Riverworld books, 2010-and-counting books, Majipoor books, magic blue horse books... help me, Jesus, I can't do it by myself.

It can't be the books. Most are unreadable, some merely boring, and a few achieve the exalted status of a well-prepared cheeseburger.

SF used to be solely the province of the visionary and/or deranged. Its writers could count on, at best, a living wage -- along with, of course, the warm admiration of thousands of the isomorphically visionary/deranged, for whatever it was worth. This was not a good thing. Philip Dick ate pet food; others committed suicide, said the hell with it, or lived lives of constant despair. Name your poison. But the crazed were allowed to flourish in their own peculiar way, and the results were, now and then, amazing.

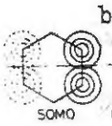
So by all means bring SF onto center stage and give it a shot at the Big Time: New York Times Best Seller Lists, mighty advances, fancy covers, seven-piece supermarket dump bins.

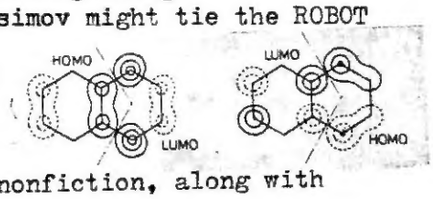
But don't take a razor to the hamstrings and then say, "Go on, get out there, buddy, and run with the best." Don't, in short, isolate the Dune-leper-magic blue horse&c. books as quintessential SF and ignore everything else. But this is, of course, precisely what mainstream corporate publishing does.

Meanwhile, back at Waldenbooks, they're honing the SF section -- you know, stripping it down to the essentials ... and Waldenbooks are spreading exponentially, in more disgusting fashion than any monster SF ever dreamed up, while the publishers are reading the writing on the shopping center walls -- which says nothing about being weighed in the balance and found wanting -- and following along.

There was a hint at the end of ROBOTS OF DAWN that Asimov might tie the ROBOT books and the FOUNDATION books together. Imagine that.

INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS, my ass. Why bother?





CHEAP TRUTH TOP TEN (Nonfiction special)

This issue's expanded Top Ten extols works of visionary nonfiction, along with lighter pieces to stanch the flow of blood from nose and ears.

THE WORLD, THE FLESH, AND THE DEVIL by J. D. Bernal. In the 1920's this visionary English scientist, his mind inflamed by what he conceived to be the imminent triumph of World Socialism, reinvented the nature of the human future. To read this book is to marvel over what science fiction might have been if Hugo Gernsback had not misled the genre. A work of staggering daring, utterly lacking in comfortable bullshit.

DISTURBING THE UNIVERSE by Freeman Dyson. The great physicist-visionary of the Orion Project explores the implications of man's role in the cosmos and the simple warmth of human life. A sad, wise, hopeful book.

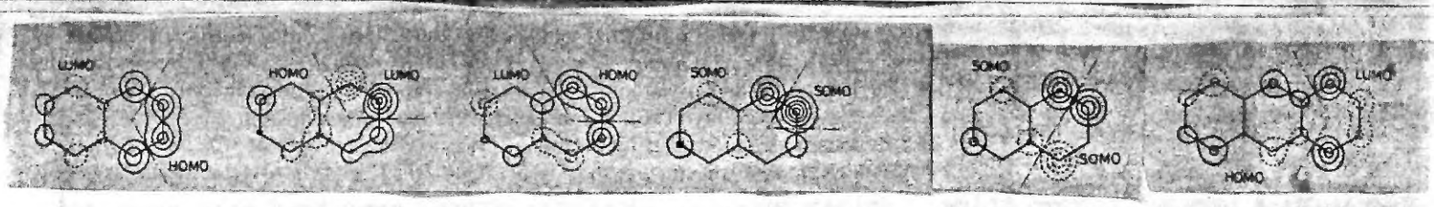
THE THIRD WAVE by Alvin Toffler. Former Marxist Toffler had his paradigms set early; he aims to be the Marx of the twenty-first century, only this time it'll be done right. A brilliant conceptual framework for seeing emergent order in the confusion of our times, deliberately pop-oriented and slanted as a polemic for action. Echoes of his rhetoric are already apparent in many politicians' sudden romance with high-tech industry. Must-reading for anyone whose head is not in a bucket.

THE NINE NATIONS OF NORTH AMERICA by Joel Garreau. Fascinating social analysis of the geographical subcultures of the continent. Floods the mind with insight. If you ever wondered why Californians are crazy, this is the book for you.

THE NEW SOLAR SYSTEM, Beatty, O'Leary, and Chaikin, eds. Mind-expanding compendium of the discoveries garnered from unmanned planetary exploration. Consigns whole reams of musty space opera to the ash-heap.

INFINITY AND THE MIND by Rudy Rucker. Mathematically rigorous treatment of the ultimate in mind-stretching concepts, drawn from the warped pen of the transrealist Seer of Lynchburg. Like being hit in the head by a bowling ball.

NEW EARTHS by James Oberg. Nasa technician Oberg tackles terraforming in this series of technical studies prefaced by SF vignettes. With his two other books, RED STAR IN ORBIT and MISSION TO MARS, Oberg has established himself as a cornucopia of cribbable data for SF writers. Worth its weight in reaction mass.
A HOUSE IN SPACE by Henry S. F. Cooper, Jr. The definitive book on Skylab, the real lowdown on what it's like to live in freefall. A treasure-house of weird sidelights and bizarre detail. Refreshingly free of paramilitary NASA tripe.
THE PSYCHOTRONIC ENCYCLOPEDIA OF FILM by Michael Weldon. A monument of bizarrist cinematic trash. The reader's preconceptions crumble under a blizzard of the worthless and deranged. Seems to include every sleazoid SF flick ever inflicted on the world, along with countless teens-on-drugs flicks, beach movies, and ax-butcher epics. Unbelievably thorough and convulsively hilarious. Deserves a place of honor on the reference shelf of every cultural mutant.
DREAM MAKERS VOLUME II by Charles Platt. More painful frankness from Platt, who has a genius for showing up others' eccentricities as if he himself were sane. Low-key, utterly convincing demonstrations of the manifold nature of psychic damage. In its portraits of the competition, this is perhaps one of the most cheering books that a would-be science fiction writer could possibly possess. For those already damaged beyond all hope, it provides irresistible frissons of warm camaraderie. Meticulous journalism with an eye for the absurd.



Man-about-graphics Bolt Upright lends us the benefit of his expertise:

My father used to buy me comic books. The reward for enduring a monthly scalping at the hands of the ex-Nazis who ran the local barbershop -- Heinz and Willy, the barbers of Belsen. It wasn't a fair trade. Dad got a son with a burr, and I got the world's greatest comic magazine; and more. I mean, yeah, OK, astronauts are astronauts if you're a kid and have a hero jones, but here's what I really needed: this guy Reed Richards, a mad scientist in the worst way, takes his girlfriend (Tuesday Weld in my movie version), her kid brother, and a possibly deranged test pilot for a joyride in an experimental rocket. Not only do they get away with it, they end up with these incredible super powers.

Ben Grimm's incessant whining used to really chap my ass. Who was he kidding? I would have gladly taken lumpy orange skin, cartoon mouse hand and foot digit allotment, and who-knows-what-kind of genitalia for the ability to crush cheap essential scenery like papier-mache.

And, not to neglect the world's second greatest comic magazine, I watched spiders constantly for that tell-tale glow of radioactivity.

When I was a child, I read comic books as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things, and bought the first six issues of AMERICAN FLAGG!, the world's greatest comic magazine.

Steranko's NICK FURY, AGENT OF SHIELD was the first comic that made me see the form as form, and the artist as auteur; MR. A, written and drawn by Steve Ditko, as bizarre and didactic as anything could possibly be, suggested nonetheless that fairly sophisticated ideological material might work in the comic book format; and more recently, the Frank Miller DAREDEVIL series with its fine balance of strong scripting, excellent art, well-developed characters, and the staples of entertainment, sex and violence, set a new high standard in the field.

The field, represented by Howard Chaykin and First Comics, responded immediately, and with such an amazing product that, after having read and re-read -- (when was the last time you wanted to re-read a comic book?) -- the first three issues of AMERICAN FLAGG!, I had the peculiar feeling that this was the first real comic book I had ever owned. There are terrific characters (the protagonist is an ex-vidporn star), impeccable art (every issue has a suitable-for-framing, right-in-your-goddam-face cover), a multi-layered, conspiracy-ridden, paranoid, balls-out story line, got politics if you want it, lettering you won't believe (by Ken Bruzenak), and whatever sex and violence you require, but never tawdry or gratuitous.

In addition to all that stuff, AMERICAN FLAGG! is science fiction of a caliber that is almost impossible to find in comics and pretty scarce anywhere else. Yeah, there's hardware. Plenty of hardware. There's an adventure guy and his adventure girls, even talking animals with mechanical hands, but here's my point: good SF is a literature of ideas. The best science fiction builds a place for them to live. It's hard to imagine a denser, more intricate, cohesive creation than the world Chaykin constructs and populates in AMERICAN FLAGG. I used to ask myself, as the simplest way of judging a fictional creation, a future-world particularly, "Could it happen? Is this projected future reasonable?" I was on the wrong track. The question is, "Does it happen?" In AMERICAN FLAGG, it happens.